

DIGITAL LIBRARIES AND PUBLIC SERVICE
Convergence and Divergence, the Human Side of Technology

By
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Digital Libraries Technologies Forum
Beijing China
May 23 - 25, 2002

It is an honor and a pleasure for me to be here today, to have this opportunity to talk about the history and the work of the U.S. National Commission on Libraries and Information Science (NCLIS). In 1970 Congress passed S. 1519 and President Nixon signed it into law. In that law, P.L. 91-345 the United States Government declared," *Library and information services adequate to meet the needs of the people of the United States are essential to achieve national goals and to utilize most effectively the Nation's educational resources...The Federal Government will cooperate with State and local governments and public and private agencies in assuring optimum provision of such services."*

That same legislation created the National Commission on Libraries and Information Science. The National Commission was created as a permanent and independent agency to assure the implementation of the new National Policy through studies, surveys, hearings, and most important, the development of impartial advice for policymakers. Heads of all other Federal agencies were directed to cooperate with the National Commission. Therefore for the past 30 years library and information services for all citizens is national policy for the U.S. Government, and the National Commission on Libraries and Information Science is the one Federal agency given the responsibility to see that this policy does address the informational and library needs of the citizens of the United States.

As a policy and planning agency, the National Commission has by law the following responsibilities:

- Advise the President and the Congress on the implementation of national policy.
- Conduct studies, surveys, and analysis of the library and information of the nation.
- Appraise the adequacies and the deficiencies of current library and information resources and services and evaluate the effectiveness of current library and information science programs.
- Develop overall plans for meeting national library and information needs and for the coordination of activities at the Federal, State, and local levels.

- Advise Federal, State, local, and private agencies regarding library and information sciences.
- Promote research and development activities, which will extend and improve the Nation's library and information handling capability as essential links in national and international communications and cooperative networks.
- Make and publish such additional reports as it deems to be necessary.
- Advise the Director of the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) on general policies with respect to the duties, powers, and authority of IMLS.

The law provides for two permanent members of the National Commission, the Librarian of Congress and the Director of the Institute of Museum and Library Services, the latter serving as an ex-officio non-voting member. There are fourteen Commissioners, like myself, appointed by the President with the advice and consent of Congress. Of the fourteen members, five must be either librarians or information specialists, one must have knowledge of the technical aspects of library services, one must have expertise in library and information services to the elderly, and the remainder must have competence in or knowledge of the library and information needs of the nation.

I was nominated by President Clinton in the fall of 1993, confirmed by the U.S. Senate on April 14, 1994 and confirmed for my second term on April 7, 1998.

What is so very unique about the National Commission is that we speak for the users of library and information services, We do not necessarily speak for the profession or the Administration. Much of what we do is done quietly, such as working with congressional staff to provide background information on proposed legislation that would have an impact on national library and information policy. We work closely with our national professional associations, with non-government organizations, and with the private sector on issues and proposed legislation that impacts national library and information policy. We serve as both facilitators and negotiators on issues to help diverse entities arrive at acceptable solutions of policy issues.

One issue closely followed by the National Commission through the years is that of public access to government information also referred to as public information. In 1990 the National Commission adopted the following Principles of Public Information.

- The public has the right of access to public information
- The Federal Government should guarantee the integrity and preservation of public information, regardless of its format.
- The Federal Government should guarantee the dissemination, reproduction, and redistribution of public information.
- The Federal Government should safeguard the privacy of persons who use or request information, as well as the persons about whom information exists in government records.
- The Federal Government should ensure a wide diversity of sources of access, private as well as government to public information.

- The Federal Government should not allow cost to obstruct the people's access to public information.
- The Federal Government should ensure that information about government information is easily available and in a single index accessible in a variety of formats.
- The Federal Government should guarantee the public access to public information, regardless of where they live and work, through national networks and programs like the Federal Depository Library Program.

I should point out that I predate computers. I have seen and worked with the technological changes that now pervade our profession-not always to the betterment of public service. In our rush to digitize libraries and use technology and the Internet, we seem not to realize that not everyone rides on this technology highway, may never ride on this highway, may not wish to ride on this highway, and may not in the end be able to pay the toll to use this highway. To quote T.S. Eliot, Where is the wisdom we have lost to knowledge? Where is the knowledge we have lost to Information?

Dr. Jose Marie Griffith (insert tile) and member of the National Commission addressed the World Wide Web and libraries in her article *Why the Web is not a Library*, published in *The Mirage of Continuity*. In her article Dr. Griffith alludes to the facts that the web is a ubiquitous information source, a bewitching attraction, it makes rare and fragile resources available anywhere, anytime, seven days a week. However not all information is available on the web, nor will all information ever be available on the web, there are no standards, uniform or otherwise, for validation and authenticity of information, there is little cataloging, and searching and retrieving is not easy. Dr. Griffiths also points out that the role of the Library will continue to be one of providing access to collections of recorded knowledge, intellectual as well as physical access to collections either in libraries or through the Internet. Librarians are information navigators helping users to find what it is they need, when they need it, and verifying the information is authentic. You will become information analysts and knowledge interpreters, effective collaborators and teachers.

Perhaps the most recent and significant work of the National Commission has been in the area of electronic/digitized government information. In 1999 we published a *Report on the Assessment of Electronic Government Information Products*. The key findings of this study, commissioned by Congress, showed a lack of understanding of the concept of permanent public access, that there is difficulty in distinguishing between permanent public access for electronic products and archiving electronic Federal records, that there is a lack of understanding of what ensuring authenticity entails, and a lack of planning for or consideration of ensuring authenticity of electronic government information products. Most important, this study showed there was a lack of strategic planning for product development and technological migration.

This study was followed by our work and publication *A Preliminary assessment of the Proposed Closure of the National Technical Information Service, a Report to the President and Congress*. In this instance the National Commission acted as a facilitator bringing together entities from both the public and the private sector to address the need

to have permanent access to government funded scientific research in both print and digitized formats.

This report identified the need for "a much broader assessment of the underlying issues involved in public information dissemination". The National Commission was then asked by Senator John McCain, then Chair of the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation, and Senator Joseph Lieberman, then ranking Democrat on the Senate Committee on Government Affairs to do the broader assessment.

In January 2001, the National Commission published *A Comprehensive Assessment of Public Information Dissemination*. The planning and work that went into this publication was an interesting blending of individuals and experts from the public sector, non-government organizations, and the private sector forming four study panels. Almost 100 individuals volunteered their time and expertise to address the following four issues - The NTIS business model, federal agency needs for central information services, public needs for government information dissemination, and partnerships between the private and public sectors for public information dissemination. The Commission then took their reports and edited them into four volumes. Volumes 1 and 2 are in both print and digitized formats and volumes 3 and 4 only available electronically.

Another area in which the National Commission has an interest is that of Information Literacy. As far back as 1974 Paul Zurkowski, then president of the Information Industry Association, introduced the concept of information literacy in a paper done for the National Commission, *The Information Service Environment Relationships and Priorities, National Program for Libraries and Information Services, Related Paper #5*.

Many countries tend to refer to the disparity between the information haves and the information have-nots as the Digital Divide. The National Commission has long been concerned with this disparity, and recently it convened a group of representatives from Government agencies, professional societies, academia, the media, and not-for profit groups, to try and find ways to overcome the Digital Divide. Convening such groups is a role the National Commission often undertakes since we are often able to broker solutions between otherwise competitive parties on an issue. The Benton Foundation, headed by a former National Commission Chairperson, Charles, Benton, is one of the leading not-for-profit groups in my country that has a long and abiding interest in the Digital Divide. They, the American Library Association, and various public interest groups, are continuing to strive for ways in which libraries can help ordinary citizens, including disabled and disadvantaged citizens, access and use of the Internet to find the information they need.

Digitized data is information but it is not knowledge, information is used to acquire knowledge, and from knowledge, hopefully, comes wisdom. Recognizing this issue is of prime importance, the National Commission sponsored a symposium in April 1996, Information Literacy and Education for the 21st Century, Toward an Agenda for Action.

Since the National Commission's statutory mandate was extended several years ago by the U.S. Congress to include international library and information matters, we began jointly planning for an international meeting on the subject of information literacy. Last fall in Washington UNESCO, the National Forum on Information Literacy, and the National Commission had the first meeting on this topic. We have tentatively scheduled the international meeting for the fall/early winter of 2002 in Prague. We have thirty-five professionals from 23 countries who have agreed to participate, and most have already, or soon will complete writing a paper on some political, economic, business, or socio-cultural aspect of information literacy.

Our working definition of information literacy is the expertise needed to identify, search for, retrieve, organize, evaluate, and then use information, especially electronic information retrieved from the World Wide Web. I am delighted to be able to tell you that Professor Ma Feicheng of Wuhan University has been invited to the Prague meeting, and has already completed his paper for us. I am foot noting my remarks today with our National Commission's website page URL address where all of the information on this meeting is located.

That this forum is being held is indicative of how libraries are rushing toward digitization of many valuable and/or fragile collections. However, in his Article, *Building a Digital Library: Concepts and Issues*, *Library Technology Reports* 32:5 Sept.-Oct. 1996: 573-738, David Barber states that "the proportion of available digital content is tiny compared to the amount of printed materials available. Many resources are so large that complete digital conversion is not a possibility." Furthermore, the time, staff and financial support may not be available for original conversion or for sustaining the digitized materials. While the digitization of rare, fragile and historic materials is a definite plus for research, there are still the unanswered questions of permanent access, the life of digitized information, strategic planning for migration of information to new technologies and the creation and maintenance of metadata. All costly and all staff intensive.

Before I was appointed to the National Commission I was the Director of a medium sized public library system in my hometown of Reno Nevada, and as such I pioneered public private partnerships with real estate developers to make land available and/or to provide financial and in-kind construction support for new or renovated buildings. Developers of shopping malls also made space available for branch libraries with reduced or free rent. Another type of collaboration is that of school public libraries, a growing trend with examples of successful partnerships in Reno, NV and Scottsdale, AZ, public and community college library partnerships in the Salt Lake County Library System and the Houston Public Library System, New Hampshire, Kentucky and Wisconsin also support school public library Partnerships. A few years ago, Gov. Davis of California, in providing financial support for school libraries, set as a priority, first funding going to school public library partnerships.

With the passage of the Museum and Library Services Act, and the National Commission was involved in the creation of this Act, the Federal Government recognized the

continued importance and efficiency of cooperative and collaborative programs, first identified in Title III of the former Library Services and Construction Act.

The work of the National Commission and the future of library and information Science are in constant change, change driven by the rapid growth of technology. Change demands flexibility, political acumen, strategic planning and advocacy skills.

Libraries are more than just repositories of our heritage, the DNA of our history and culture; libraries are educational institutions, media centers, cultural centers, information centers, training centers, and part of an international global network. It is my strong belief that our present information society is dependent on libraries more than any other institution.

I can best sum up my philosophy in terms of my personal and professional life with a quote from Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr., "I think that, as life is action and passion, it is required of us that we should share the passion and action of our time at peril of being judged not to have lived."

We are living in a time I consider the hinge period between the print world and a digitized world. In turn this means you are living in an incredibly exciting time. You have the opportunity to create your own futures. Will this be easy, no. Will it be frustrating, yes. Will it be rewarding, absolutely? It will also be the most challenging of your professional lives, and I envy you the opportunity to make your visions into reality.

Thank you.

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